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Professional identity development: Learning and journeying together

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ABSTRACT

Background: Pharmacy students start to develop their professional values through engagement with the course, practice exposure, staff and fellow students. Group working is an element of pedagogy which draws on the social aspects of learning to facilitate knowledge and skills development, but its potential role in facilitating professional identity formation has as yet been under researched.

Objectives: This study aimed to explore the potential of mutual learning through group work to contribute not only to academic knowledge and understanding, but also to the development of students' professional values and selves.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 home and international first year undergraduate pharmacy students in a UK School of Pharmacy, to explore their experiences of interacting for learning with other students on the course.

Findings: Thematic analysis of the interview data highlighted four main benefits of mutual learning, which are that it: promotes friendly interactions; aids learning about the subject and the profession; opens the mind through different opinions and ways of thinking; and enables learning about other people. Through working together students developed their communication skills and confidence; reflectively considered their own stance in the light of others' experiences and healthcare perspectives; and started to gain a wider worldview, potentially informing their future interactions with patients and colleagues. Some difficulties arose when group interactions functioned less well.

Conclusions: Opportunity for collaboration and exchange can positively influence development of students' professional outlook and values. However, careful management of group working is required, in order to create a mutually supportive environment wherein students feel able to interact, share and develop together.

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1. Introduction

Throughout their education, pharmacy students are embarking on the journey to become professionals. They are developing a sense of their personal and professional values, beliefs and ideas through their engagement with the course, the pedagogy and practice exposure, and their interactions with faculty, staff and fellow students. These dynamic and continuous interactions will enable them to develop and construct knowledge about their subject, their profession, others and themselves. Although there is no commonly accepted definition of 'professionalism' or 'professional identity' in relation to pharmacy or indeed to other healthcare disciplines, these terms are both used to encompass attributes that are generally considered important in a healthcare practitioner, including, for example: having integrity, being patient-

centred, showing compassion, being a good communicator, being meticulous.^{1–4} Although some elements of professionalism can be and are explicitly taught and practised within the undergraduate curriculum, many aspects depend upon the acquisition through other means of personal, as well as professional, values and behaviours.

Health professionals' identity formation, which is not static, but constantly undergoing reformation, depends largely on social and relational factors.^{5,6} Group work is an element of pedagogy which draws on the social aspects of learning, as well as upon the range of skills present within a group, and is seen as a means of fostering collaboration, teamwork and leadership; student interaction, communication and engagement; enhancing students' intellectual, personal and professional development; and encouraging deeper learning.^{7–9} When the process functions well it can produce affective benefits such as participation, belonging and involvement, but conversely can be a source of conflict, tension and frustration

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due to differing expectations and ways of learning and clashes of personality.^{10–13} Working with peers inevitably highlights some of the issues in dealing with 'difference'. Although a rich environment for being challenged and stimulated through different approaches and ideas, it also risks reinforcing power differentials, oppressive practices and stereotyping if unchecked.⁹ As graduates and professional pharmacists, students of pharmacy will serve a diverse population of patients and work in multi-professional, multi-skilled and multi-cultural teams. Enabling them therefore, through their undergraduate education, to develop a wider appreciation of people and healthcare practices, beliefs and approaches has current and future value both for them as individuals and for the good of the profession and society.

Studies on the role of intercultural learning within healthcare are limited. However, work has shown the potential of multicultural group working - whereby culture is understood as 'difference' rather than necessarily nationality - to act as a platform upon which students can share perspectives and experiences, on a professional as well as a personal level, helping them to enhance their intercultural communication skills, learn and understand something of others and their worlds and perspectives, and appreciate and reflect upon different healthcare practices and approaches.^{14–17} In this way, students are entering their 'community of practice'¹⁸ as they negotiate with each other their ways of understanding and becoming health professionals.

This study therefore aimed to explore the potential of mutual learning through group work to contribute not only to the development of academic knowledge and understanding, but also to the development of students' professional values and selves.

2. Methods

This study concerns how the social aspects of learning are interlinked with students' development of personal and professional selves. It therefore employed a qualitative approach to understanding student experiences. The research was carried out with students on a four-year undergraduate Masters course in a UK School of Pharmacy, which has a relatively high proportion of international and ethnically diverse students. The course contains a range of group activities in all years of the course, such as group discussions of cases, group presentations, and working in simulated pharmacy environments. The population of first-year pharmacy students is likely to vary considerably in their previous experience of working in peer groups, and especially so within an internationalised course, due to different educational and pedagogical norms.^{19,20} Many of the activities are in School-allocated groups (which change each semester); fewer are student-selected. Assessment is conducted almost entirely on an individual basis. However, the culmination of group work is in the fourth year of the course, most of which is dependent upon collaborative working and learning, and which thus feeds into preparedness for assessment.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 first-year students during their second semester, which explored their experiences and perceptions of interactions with others, particularly through group work. The sample, consisting of 7 British, 7 international, and 3 British (other heritage) students, represented 10% of the first year cohort. Participants were recruited by volunteer sampling. The researcher addressed all first year students at the start of a lecture, to explain the study and its purpose, distributed information sheets and asked students who were willing to sign up to participate. Information and sign-up sheets were given to all students, which they were asked to return at the end of the lecture, whether offering to participate or not. This was done so as not to draw any distinction between volunteers and non-volunteers. The

information provided was followed up by e-mail and mutually convenient times for face-to-face interviews arranged.

Participants were interviewed individually. Before each interview, each participant was given the information sheet to read and a consent form to sign. These made clear that participation was entirely voluntary and that the choice to participate, or anything said during the interviews, would have no bearing upon marks or progression. Interviews were audio-recorded and notes taken at the time. The study was reviewed and approved by the School of Pharmacy Research Ethics Committee.

The data were analysed inductively²¹ in order to identify themes of common significance emerging from the data, which related to the research question. This was done by coding the interview data by hand. Firstly, transcripts were read to gain a sense of the whole. Secondly, relevant words and ideas expressed by the students about their experiences and views of learning through group work were identified. Thirdly, these words and ideas were grouped into categories by looking for areas of congruence. Transcripts were then re-read in the light of these emergent categories in order to check meaning and context. The final step was to identify the overarching themes which arose from the clustering of these categories.

3. Results and discussion

The thematic analysis of the interview data gave rise to four main themes describing aspects of students' collaborative learning. These were that group working: promotes friendly interactions; aids learning about the subject and the profession; opens the mind and shows different opinions and ways of thinking; and enables learning about other people.

All students could see the benefits of working in School-assigned rather than self-selected groups, and most expressed a preference for this. The themes help to explain the reason for this preference and illustrate how students begin to develop aspects of their professional learning through working together.

3.1. Promotes friendly interactions

All students found group work valuable in enabling them to get to know other students. It helped them, particularly in their early days of the course, to find people with whom they felt comfortable and could befriend.

Making friends is not something I find particularly comfortable or easy – but I've made friends on the course through being in groups. You end up talking to people and because I've seen them before I can sit with them again.

Students were generally positive about the benefits of group working, particularly in School-selected groups, so that all were put into similar, unfamiliar situations. This feeling of being 'outside one's comfort zone' even seemed to help some students appreciate the similar situation of others, so be more inclusive. There was a feeling that having to work closely with others simply helped the course feel friendlier, generally aiding interactions, because students mixed with those that they would not otherwise have done.

[Group work] is helping a lot, because now I'm seeing all these international students [from countries] I've never seen before and now when I pass them we smile or wave. I wouldn't necessarily sit next to them in lectures, but I know you and it's nice.

Students could see clearly the tendency within the course for

friendship to form based on feelings of familiarity and common traits such as nationality, religion or ethnicity^{22–24} and they appreciated the opportunity to interact more widely. Having to participate in School-allocated groups started breaking down barriers between students, particularly between those who would not naturally mix. It provided the basis upon which students could start to feel more comfortable with each other, which opened up opportunities for subsequent deeper discussions on a more personal level. Increasing friendly relations between students also enhances their sense of belonging, tending to increase participation and engagement in mutual learning^{25,26}; they are more likely to feel part of the student group of pharmacists-in-the-making.

A few students noted however that communication did not always flow - which could be, but was not necessarily, due to competence or confidence in language ability.

It's really good when you have a good group, but if put with people and there's no conversation it's terrible and you just want to leave.

However, group work was a medium through which students could practise and improve their (intercultural) communication, and become more confident in their ability to interact with others. Importantly it enabled students to become more aware of their own and other's communication needs and shortcomings.

It can be quite intimidating if students chat in their own language – but that goes both ways doesn't it, and I know I talk quite fast! (British student)

It's a confidence thing as well. You have to get over accents and ways of speaking.

They tend to include me; I can talk as much as I need to (from an international student)

Having to interact with others, participate in discussions and exchange ideas helped students develop their communication skills. It was apparent that the process of working together provoked some insight into one's own and other's communication abilities and needs, and the adjustments that might need to be made to facilitate inclusion and understanding. There is an instrumental relevance of being able to make connections with others, as intercultural communication ability is an attribute generally sought by employers. Yet students were more likely to express the benefits in relation to being able to communicate more effectively with patients and customers, rather than as a skill linked to employability. Students clearly articulated how having to interact for learning also helped them to develop confidence in engaging with others and in their ability to form and contribute opinions. They were therefore developing attitudes and skills which would enable them to interact more effectively with patients and colleagues, including providing advice, participating in discussions and offering professional opinions.

3.2. Aids learning about the subject and the profession

The quality of students' learning was inevitably affected by group membership and dynamics.^{9,11} However, it was clear that working with people who were not their close friends - though not necessarily the easy option, in terms of efficient, relaxed working - caused students to think about how they approached and organised their work, and they tended to put in more effort. A few offered that they would have naturally chosen to work with their friends, but admitted that having to work with students whom they knew less well actually pushed them to engage to a greater extent.

You're more likely to 'bring things to the table'; it gives you drive.

With your mates you don't take it as seriously ... but when you're with people you don't know, and you're maybe affecting their education, and they really want to get something out of the session then you do try more.

This was ultimately found to be of mutual benefit to their learning.

You can sort of teach each other and explain things; you learn by teaching and by working as a group as a whole.

Students developed their learning and started to become co-creators of their knowledge as they worked through discussions and tackled problems together. This necessitated developing their communication skills in conveying aspects of learning to each other. Explaining concepts which were not understood or which could be differently interpreted required an ability to tailor language and the level of explanation appropriately. In this respect, students were practising the skills that they would be likely to need as pharmacists when explaining concepts to different individuals at different levels.

Only three students raised that problems arose when interactions and conversations did not work. Learning was therefore not facilitated, and on occasions students were made to feel excluded.

Generally willing to share ideas, but if I'm the only Asian in the group, locals tend to chat amongst themselves.

The Lancet Commissions Report on the education of health professionals²⁷ suggests that 'professionalism for the 21st century should promote quality, embrace teamwork and be centred around the needs of patients and populations'. We see that working through group assignments had the potential to reflect some of this in fostering values oriented towards others, through creating a sense of responsibility to group members, building team commitment, and fostering an ethos of mutual support. Conversely, when students were not able to recognise the needs of others, there were experiences of exclusion, which would cause students to disengage from their learning and development. It is essential therefore that activities are appropriately designed to warrant the input of all students, but also that students recognise a responsibility to others in allowing (and when necessary, encouraging) their voice.

One important aspect of engagement and learning together draws upon the considerable range of experience of pharmacy which exists within the cohort, so that discussions between students with greater or less knowledge and experience helps to inform and place learning into context. Case studies, for example, were commonly cited as a good means to compare and learn more broadly about the subject and the profession.

People have different experiences, so when you do case studies it actually tells you more - for example placements experience, different backgrounds, different personal thinking - you can discuss and see why there's a difference.

Facilitated group discussions of pharmacy and inter-professional placements also provoked students to compare experiences of and views on professional roles (internationally as well as in the UK) as perceived by themselves, other health professionals and patients. Students could therefore start to explore elements of their developing professional identity through their conversations

and reflections. Academic staff and practitioners played an important role in helping students make sense of their placement experiences and learn through questioning and dialogue.

3.3. Opens the mind through different opinions and ways of thinking

It was apparent that all students in the study not only learnt about the subject material but, through their discussions, uncovered different perspectives and approaches to learning. Broader healthcare perspectives were uncovered and previously held opinions and assumptions were challenged, as students had to become more open-minded in their thinking and open in their discussions.

They started to become more accommodating of different viewpoints, even if they did not necessarily agree with them, because conversations enabled some understanding. This is pertinent given the necessity for some healthcare professionals to provide services, despite personal reservations for ethical or religious reasons, and highlights the value of ethical case-based discussions at undergraduate level as a means of opening up conversations and promoting understanding, which will inform their future roles as pharmacists.

More generally, students could start to develop a sense of some of the wider considerations within pharmacy - for example bases for clinical and ethical decisions, different applications of knowledge and the need to be flexible and reflexive in one's thinking.

People have different ideas sometimes. You may not agree with what they're saying, but you can't just go against what they're saying – you have to understand where they're coming from.

We have interpreted things in different ways, but you can share ideas and it opens your mind to new ways of thinking to you.

It makes me think about things in a different way that I would never have thought about - for example gelatine capsules or consent for treatment.

As part of learning to work in teams, students were also confronted with having to accommodate different ways of working. Things did not always run smoothly when there were differing opinions about the method or timescale for tackling assignments, for example.

Sometimes I don't like the way things work in my group, but we just manage to work around it. When there is someone who is not responsible or who is always missing then that is a problem. On occasions a person just turns up at the final event - they might have done the work but the other members of the team know nothing about that person.

Students therefore had to learn to be adaptable and to compromise in order to produce the best mutual outcome - an important skill within the professional work environment.

3.4. Enables learning about other people

Because group working aided interactions and friendships, it also promoted learning about others, their perspectives and backgrounds. Through conversations within multicultural group working, students were challenged to consider different understandings of the world and to re-evaluate their own stance and beliefs.

In the classroom as well, you learn so much about their cultures, their countries; just look at how different it is from what you are

used to. Those countries you just know a little about and you find out that it's not actually that way.

You hear about all these stereotypes but when you meet the people you go, 'Wait a minute, that's wrong'.

Students could see the relevance for their professional lives of their personal learning which came through their interactions.

It's practice for the future I think.

Being on a healthcare course, it's made me more aware of background and trying to learn from it.

You start to recognise that people have completely different backgrounds, come from completely different places, and that's not just internationally. The patient population. It can be confusing when you're a pharmacist and trying to explain to a patient; it can be difficult understanding why they don't maybe their beliefs about healthcare and stuff, but not because they're from different part of the world or anything but just being taught to recognise that everyone has a different view of the world.

Within School-selected groups, students had to work with 'difference'. This might have involved students from different national, ethnic or religious backgrounds, but also students with, for example, disabilities, different upbringing, social class, interests or family experiences – in other words 'not like me'. Knowing about others' backgrounds helped to put into context some of the different opinions and perspectives expressed. This led to somewhat intangible but valuable gains; as one student commented: 'something you can't get from the textbooks'. The opportunity to learn about others and their backgrounds is so valuable for pharmacists, who could potentially engage in a more informed way with patients through having a wider appreciation of some personal, social, religious or cultural considerations.

Group work was therefore shown to be a medium through which students start to develop aspects of their professional and personal values and identities, in a way that cannot be gained through pedagogy that is not interactive. Through interactions with each other, students are exposed to different ways of learning, communicating, working and thinking - which will inform their future practice as they develop competence and skills, a greater appreciation of others' perspectives and needs and a development of their professional selves. It is important to note that sufficient structure and facilitation is nevertheless required to ensure inclusivity and purpose. Without this, group tasks can be perceived as irrelevant or superficial activities that add little to learning and professional development or, worse, act to reinforce stereotypes and exclusion. Attention should therefore be paid in Schools of Pharmacy to the role of group work - not just for supporting academic learning, but to how it can be used to support healthcare and societal values in trainee pharmacists, through fostering communication, cooperation, mutual understanding, wider learning and development of professional identity.

4. Study limitations

The study was based on a relatively small number of students, in one School, who self-selected to participate. Their views and experiences may therefore not fully represent the cohort. However, questions were open-ended and asked for students' experiences of classes, with no connotations of seeking good or bad 'feedback'. The researcher also taught the students (albeit for relatively few classes), thus it is possible that students were guarded with their

answers. However, students understood that the study was a means to potentially improve their experiences, so a chance to 'have their say'.

5. Conclusion

The findings from the study demonstrate that a curricular space providing opportunity for collaboration and exchange in a structured way can have a positive contributory effect upon development of students' professional attitudes, skills and values. Analysis of the interview data illustrated how students integrated their subject knowledge with a greater understanding of others and their situations, enhanced intercultural communication skills and a re-evaluation of their own knowledge and perspectives, all of which has the potential to inform their future pharmacy practice.

However, careful management of multicultural collaborative working is required, in order to create a mutually supportive environment wherein students feel able to and are allowed to participate, have their contributions valued and can develop greater mutual understanding both as undergraduates and for their future careers and lives. Teachers of pharmacy should therefore give consideration to how collaborative working can be maximised as a site for students to explore together their subjects, profession, selves and others as they begin their journey in becoming professional pharmacists.

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